

Leadership Theories, Traits, and the Development of a Personal Leadership Philosophy

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Leadership Theories, Traits, and the Development

Counselor educators are often called upon to serve as leaders in academic, clinical, and community contexts. Effective leadership in counseling extends beyond administrative oversight; it requires a deep understanding of theoretical frameworks, ethical practice, and cultural competence. Doctoral learners must develop the ability to synthesize leadership theories with personal traits and values, ultimately constructing a philosophy of leadership that guides their professional work. This paper compares three leadership theories, explores leadership traits and ethics, identifies core knowledge and skills, and culminates in a personal leadership theory aligned with counselor education values.

Assessing Three Primary Leadership Theories

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership emphasizes inspiring and motivating followers to exceed expectations and embrace organizational vision. First articulated by Burns (1978) and later expanded by Bass (1990), this theory highlights four dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.

Transformational leadership is particularly relevant in counseling education, where faculty and supervisors must motivate trainees to integrate ethical standards and professional identity into practice (DeDiego, Chan, & Basma, 2022). Research shows transformational leaders foster resilience, commitment, and innovation, especially in complex organizations (McKenzie, Wagstaff, & McDougall, 2023).

Servant Leadership

Introduced by Greenleaf (1977), servant leadership prioritizes the growth and well-being of followers above the leader's own advancement. This style aligns closely with the counseling

profession's values of empathy, advocacy, and service. Servant leaders focus on listening, stewardship, and commitment to others' development. Studies demonstrate that servant leadership enhances psychological safety and ethical climates in organizations (Eva et al., 2019). In counselor education, servant leaders create inclusive environments where diversity and advocacy are central (Hunter, Hanks, Holman, Curry, & Lewis, 2021).

Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership, grounded in positive psychology, emphasizes self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internalized moral perspective (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Bill George (2003) popularized the concept, arguing that authentic leaders foster trust and credibility by aligning actions with core values. For counselor educators, authentic leadership models honesty and accountability while reinforcing ethical responsibility. This approach also enhances cultural humility, an essential quality for leaders navigating multicultural and social justice issues in higher education and clinical contexts.

Comparison

While transformational leadership inspires through vision, servant leadership serves by prioritizing others' growth, and authentic leadership emphasizes congruence between values and behavior. All three emphasize ethics, but servant leadership most directly mirrors counseling's advocacy orientation, whereas transformational leadership fuels professional development, and authentic leadership cultivates trust and transparency.

Leadership Traits, Leadership Ethics, and Multicultural Competence

Research on leadership traits consistently highlights qualities such as integrity, empathy, resilience, adaptability, and communication (Northouse, 2022). Effective leaders demonstrate emotional intelligence and cultural humility, which allow them to connect authentically across

diverse groups.

Leadership ethics

These ethics involve acting in ways that are consistent with organizational values, professional codes, and moral responsibility. In counseling, ethical leadership requires modeling adherence to the ACA Code of Ethics and integrating advocacy for marginalized populations (Hunter et al., 2021).

Multicultural Competence

This type of competence is equally critical. The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC; ACA, 2015) emphasize self-awareness, understanding systems of oppression, and advocacy. Leaders who lack cultural competence risk perpetuating inequities in their organizations. Conversely, leaders who practice cultural humility foster inclusive environments and increase organizational effectiveness (Johnson & Johnson, 2025).

Together, traits, ethics, and multicultural competence form a foundation for leadership that is not only effective but aligned with the values of the counseling profession.

Traits of Being a Leader

The traits most consistently associated with effective leadership include:

- **Integrity:** acting in accordance with values and ethical codes.
- **Empathy:** the ability to understand and honor others' perspectives.
- **Vision:** articulating clear goals and inspiring others toward them.
- **Adaptability:** responding effectively to challenges and change.
- **Communication:** listening actively and articulating direction clearly.
- **Resilience:** maintaining composure and perseverance during setbacks.

For counselor educators, these traits are critical because they directly influence the ability to guide students, supervisees, and colleagues in ethical and inclusive practice.

Baseline Knowledge and Skills for Leaders

Regardless of context, all leaders should possess:

- **Knowledge of leadership theories and models** to guide decision-making.
- **Understanding of organizational systems** to ensure effective management.
- **Cultural competence** and the ability to integrate diversity, equity, and inclusion principles into leadership (Hunter et al., 2021).
- **Skills in communication and conflict resolution** to foster collaboration.
- **Strategic planning and problem-solving skills** to sustain organizational growth.
- **Commitment to ethical practice and advocacy** as outlined in ACA competencies (ACA, 2009; 2015).

These baseline skills are especially important in counselor education, where leaders shape both learning environments and professional standards.

Personal Knowledge and Skills

In reflecting on my own leadership development, I recognize strengths in empathy, integrity, and communication. My background in counseling has cultivated strong relational skills and an ability to listen deeply to others' experiences. I also demonstrate resilience and adaptability in the face of challenges, qualities that have allowed me to persevere through academic and professional obstacles.

Knowledge and Skills to Adopt

I plan to strengthen my capacity for strategic planning and systems-level thinking to improve organizational outcomes. Additionally, I seek to deepen my multicultural competence, particularly in addressing systemic inequities in higher education and clinical practice. As Hunter et al. (2021) note, leaders of color face unique hurdles in counseling organizations; adopting advocacy skills and policies to reduce these barriers is a priority for my growth as a leader.

Personal Philosophy of Leadership

My philosophy of leadership integrates elements of servant, transformational, and authentic leadership. I believe that leaders must begin with service, prioritizing the growth and well-being of those they lead, while also inspiring others with vision and modeling authenticity in behavior. For me, leadership is a process of empowerment, advocacy, and accountability.

This philosophy aligns with my worldview, which emphasizes dignity, social justice, and the inherent worth of every individual. As a counselor educator, I see leadership as an opportunity to model ethical responsibility, foster inclusive environments, and empower future counselors to become advocates themselves. My theory of leadership is thus a servant-transformational approach, rooted in authenticity, guided by ethics, and sustained by multicultural competence.

Conclusion

Counselor educators must understand and apply leadership theories, traits, and skills in ways that promote ethical and inclusive practice. Transformational, servant, and authentic leadership each provide valuable insights, and integrating them strengthens leadership effectiveness. Traits such as integrity, empathy, and adaptability, combined with ethical responsibility and multicultural competence, define effective leaders in counseling contexts. Reflecting on my strengths and growth areas has allowed me to craft a personal leadership

philosophy grounded in service, vision, and authenticity. This philosophy not only aligns with counseling's professional values but also equips me to meet the complex challenges of leadership in counselor education.

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